

# History of the Use of Tolls in the United States

Tolling has been used for centuries to finance highways.

It has a long history in the United States: Some of America's greatest engineering feats, such as the Holland Tunnel in New York and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, were funded through tolls. Tolls are not new to Washington, either. In fact, tolls are the traditional method of financing the construction of major bridges in the state. Since 1940, 15 bridges have been constructed using bonds backed by tolls, including Evergreen Point Bridge (now SR 520), Hood Canal Bridge, the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and the Vancouver/Portland Bridge (I-5).

George Washington favored toll roads as a way to expand westward, and early road building in the United States relied heavily on private, profit-seeking entities. The historical remnants of these early turnpikes can be seen in numerous roads with the moniker "turnpike." The earliest turnpike in the United States was the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Road built in 1795. These early turnpikes ultimately failed as more efficient canals and then railroads were developed in the mid-1800s.

It was not until the popularization of automobiles in the early to mid-20th century that toll-backed financing gained renewed popularity. Starting with the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the 1930s, state after state embarked on building intercity highways using toll revenue bonds. For the most part, these new highways were developed by special-purpose authorities and were financed with bonds backed by the anticipated toll collections. This era of turnpike building extended into the 1950s and early 1960s, but mostly ended with the advent of the Interstate Highway System begun in 1956. Though some of the early turnpikes paid off their debts and removed their tolls, most still operate as tolled facilities, since the need to upgrade, expand, maintain and extend them could only be funded through toll collection.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw another revival of the toll-financing concept, this time focusing on urban expressways in a few fast-growing areas, where traditional revenue sources were inadequate to meet growing traffic demands.

In the 1990s and continuing into the early part of the 21st century, toll-facility development continued, this time enhanced by the introduction and promise of electronic toll collection to reduce or eliminate the delays commonly associated with traditional toll roads. Electronic toll collection also opened the opportunity for new concepts in tolling, such as high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes, express toll lanes and truck-only lanes.

Innovations are proceeding at a rapid pace, and soon it may be feasible to enhance toll roads, using global positioning satellites (GPS) or roadside short-range radio methods.

Tolls are still being used to fund new high-cost projects in Texas, California, Florida, Colorado and here in Washington. With the advent of electronic toll collection, tolls or user fees can now be used to manage congestion on heavily traveled urban highways with limited capacity. Using price to manage demand is an accepted approach in the airline, hotel and telecommunications industries, to name a few. With electronic tolling, this approach can now be used on highways to provide motorists with a faster, more reliable trip, and many regions are starting to move in that direction.

This approach is being used successfully in Minnesota, California and Texas to improve the capacity of existing roads, to provide express commute lanes, and to offer a more reliable commute to drivers who choose to pay a fee to use the tolled facility. These programs have met with considerable success, and studies have shown that they are popular with motorists from all walks of life. Similar projects are currently underway or being planned for Georgia, Oregon, Virginia and the Washington, D.C. area.

